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ABSTRACT

This essay reports the results of the latest Transfer Assembly Project examining the transfer behavior of students entering community colleges in 1995 and moving on to public in-state senior institutions by 1999. The essay also addresses the strengths and weaknesses of the Center's transfer rate definition and the reasons underlying differences in transfer rates. Since this study took twelve years to complete, the study's methodologies and findings are presented in a historical and comparative perspective. The study found that the national rate of transfer was 25.2% which indicates that the transfer function of American community colleges in intact. Community colleges provide an important avenue of educational progress for a large portion of the population. It should be noted that the lowest transfer rate was 15.3% for black students followed by 16.9% for Hispanic students. The study concludes that the increase in transfer rate reported from the 1999 and 2001 Transfer Assemblies might be the first signs of such a trend. Furthermore, future administrations of the survey using the same definition will be able to further document changes in the community college transfer function. (Contains 18 references and 3 tables.) (MZ)

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National Transfer Rates Are Up!
Results of the 2001 Transfer Assembly Project

By Katalin Szelényi

ED 482 719

Since the baby boomers began entering college in the 1960s, community colleges have been a major point of entry to higher education for a steadily growing number of people in the United States. By 1975, due to the demands of the rising population of college aspirants including an increasing number of 18-year olds, these institutions enrolled almost fifty percent of the country's undergraduates (Cohen, 1998). Many of these students, transferring the credits they had earned at two-year colleges, continued their progress toward the baccalaureate at four-year institutions (Cohen & Brawer, 1996a). At the beginning of the 21st century, American higher education is facing conditions similar to those 40 years ago. According to the 2000 Census, the population of college-aged individuals will soon embark on a substantial increase reflected in the rise of almost 6 million in the number of 10-14 and 15-19-year olds during the past 10 years (Gibson, 2001). Additionally, enrollment in postsecondary institutions is projected to increase from 14.6 million in 1998 to around 17.5 million by 2010 (Gerard & Hussar, 2000).

How will the rising competition for seats at the nation's colleges and universities affect the community college mission of providing access to higher education? Cohen & Brawer (1996a) described a decrease in community colleges' efforts to foster the transfer function, reflected in increasing enrollment patterns in vocational and continuing education, as opposed to collegiate, or transfer, programs. However, the currently growing demand for postsecondary education may, once again, bring education for

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transfer back into the limelight. In addition, in several of the nation's largest community college systems - in California, Texas, and Washington - the transfer function is increasingly emphasized as an important tool in overcoming the restrictions on the recruitment of traditionally underrepresented groups imposed by laws banning affirmative action (Hebel, 2000).

In order to document the trends and changes in the rate of transfer from two- to four-year institutions, a consistent and valid tool is necessary. Given the multiple definitions of transfer rates and the long-lasting absence of a study periodically and consistently assessing transfer activity, efforts to document trends have proved difficult and at times confusing. In 1989, with the purpose of filling this niche existing in the assessment of transfer rates, the Center for the Study of Community Colleges initiated the originally annual and currently biannual Transfer Assembly Project. The study has been consistent in its use of a definition that has, over the years, proved to be a valid and reliable tool for measuring transfer rates on the national level. Another equally important purpose of the Transfer Assembly is to provide a transfer rate model that colleges, universities, and state agencies can utilize as a basis for comparing their rates with the national norm.

This essay reports the results of the latest Transfer Assembly Project examining the transfer behavior of students entering community colleges in 1995 and moving on to public in-state senior institutions by 1999. Given the 12-year history of the project, the study's methodologies and findings are presented in a historical and comparative perspective, while also outlining the results related to the two new categories - gender and citizenship status - added to the survey instrument. The essay also addresses the

strengths and weaknesses of the Center's transfer rate definition and the reasons underlying between- and within-state differences in transfer rates.

Who Counts as a Transfer Student?

While recognizing the importance of examining a variety of transfer behaviors, including reverse (movement from 4- to 2-year colleges); horizontal (movement from one college to an institution of the same type); and concurrent (enrollment in two institutions at the same time) transfers (McCormick & Carroll, 1997), the Transfer Assembly is directed exclusively at the study of forward vertical transfer activity, i.e. movement from community colleges to four-year institutions.

Existing Transfer Definitions. Since the inception of the very first transfer studies, a number of transfer rate definitions have been proposed, all investigating the same phenomenon from slightly different angles. Depending on what portion of the student population is examined, various transfer studies have reported results ranging from 5 to 84 percent (Cohen, 1990). How did these reports reach such disparate conclusions about transfer rates? The answer to this question lies in the highly different student populations targeted by the surveys. By dividing the number of transfers by the total enrollment of the community college, results can be as low as 5 percent. In contrast, dividing by the number of community college entrants intending to transfer and subsequently earning an associate degree may yield results around the 84 percent mark.

Research findings based on the National Longitudinal Study of the High School Graduating Class of 1972 demonstrate the problem. Adelman (1988) found that regardless of actual degree attainment at the two- or four-year institution, around 20

percent of students ever attending a community college continue their studies at senior colleges and universities. When only students who subsequently earned a bachelors degree were considered, the figure was 11 percent, and for those students who had attained an associate as well as a bachelors degree, a further drop to 6 percent was reported. Another study relied on surveying community college "leavers," students who, having completed six units at a community college, left the institution without returning the following fall. Transfer, under this model, is limited to immediate movement to the senior institution (Berman, Weiler & Associates, 1990). The transfer rate obtained with the use of this method was 26 percent.

Several of these transfer studies have been criticized for their failure to examine transfer behavior longitudinally, relying on cross-sectional measurement instead. Another often voiced criticism refers to the lack of follow-up studies capable of establishing a nationally valid transfer rate definition that can be adopted and utilized on the state and institutional levels (Lanaan & Sanchez, 1996, Hirose, 1994). However, it is important to emphasize that by its very nature, no transfer definition is perfect. Defining a study's sample population by including or excluding certain student and curricular (e.g. vocational vs. academic course-taking patterns) characteristics that would facilitate or hinder student transfer to senior institutions and developing the timeframe during which students are tracked, necessarily limits all transfer studies.

The Transfer Assembly Project. The Center for the Study of Community Colleges (CSCC) has consistently used the following definition of transfer since its first survey in 1989: *all students entering the two-year college in a given year who have no prior college experience and who complete at least twelve college-credit units, divided into the*

number of that group who take one or more classes at an in-state, public university within four years.

This definition was constructed on the basis of certain guidelines as to what portion of the student body should and should not be included in assessing transfer rates. In addition, the ready availability of data at colleges, universities, or state system offices was also an essential consideration for the study. Accordingly, the Transfer Assembly definition does *not* include (Cohen, 1993):

- all community college entrants, because the figure thus derived would include previous baccalaureate degree recipients;
- only those students who intend to transfer because of the unreliability of data on student intentions;
- only the most recent high school graduates because of the high frequency of students returning to higher education after a period of stopping out;
- only those students who take academic courses because students engaged in vocational education can and do transfer;
- only full-time students because part-time students constitute two-thirds of community college enrollment and a high percentage of the transfers;
- only associate degree recipients because most students transfer before earning a degree from their community college;
- only students at the sophomore level because half of all students transfer before obtaining 30 units at the community college.

Included in the definition are:

- students taking courses for college credit, thus excluding non-transferable remedial and non-credit work;
- students completing a minimum of 12 units at the community college, requiring a minimum amount of time allowing the colleges to engage in the academic preparation of their students;
- students transferring to an in-state, four-year public university within four years of community college entry, thus allowing for the possibility of stopping out and subsequently returning to higher education.

Strengths, Weaknesses, and Criticisms

Over the past 12 years, the Transfer Assembly proved to be a highly reliable tool for assessing student mobility from community colleges to public in-state senior institutions. As such, it has been able to provide a definition yielding highly consistent results from year to year. Furthermore, the periodic assessment undertaken by the CSCC has been influential in alleviating some of the confusion created by previous transfer definitions. By examining the number of students who had completed 12 credits at the two-year institution, the study also provides a model of persistence. One other advantage of the Transfer Assembly lies in its reliance on data that are fairly feasible to obtain from the colleges, and more recently, from centralized databases stored at state agencies, such as community college boards or boards of higher education.

The Transfer Assembly, however, has several limitations that may lead to a failure to account for a proportion of the student body transferring to senior institutions.

First, the focus on public institutions results in the omission of those students who transferred to private colleges and universities. Second, due to the emphasis on tracking transfers to in-state four-year institutions only, student mobility to out-of-state colleges remains unexamined. And lastly, the limit on transfer activity up to four years after enrolling in a community college excludes those students whose return to higher education entails a longer process.

Additional criticisms referred to the Transfer Assembly's inability to account for student intentions and the absence of differentiation between students enrolled in academic/transfer as opposed to vocational classes. Both categories, by concentrating on students who entered the community college with the intention to transfer to a senior institution or those who chose a course-taking pattern that facilitates transfer, would result in higher national transfer rates (Cohen, 1993). However, the CSCC has maintained its determination not to include student intent and the type of courses attended. The underlying reasons for this approach are the following: Not only are student intentions inconsistently collected by institutions, students may also modify their goals while enrolled at a community college (ibid.). Furthermore, many vocational classes can be counted for transfer credit. In California, as an example, 72.6 percent of non-liberal arts course offerings are transferable to institutions in the California State University system, while the corresponding figure is 26.7 percent for the University of California (Striplin, 2000). Distinctions between vocationally and academically oriented students are also difficult to make because many students concurrently enroll in vocational as well as academic classes.

Data Collection Methodology

In 1989, the first survey was directed at community colleges with an at least 25 percent minority population driven by the project's initial sponsor, the Ford Foundation's strong interest in minority achievement and progress. Out of the 240 community colleges contacted, 48 provided data on their 1984 cohort that had transferred to four-year institutions by 1989. A year later, in the 1990 round of the survey, the sample of community colleges increased to 114 and in 1991, 155 institutions participated (Cohen, 1994).

While the data collected from individual colleges included a nationally representative sample, the institutions ran into a serious obstacle in their attempts to provide some of the information requested. Although the colleges' own student information systems included data on entrants with no prior college experience as well as those who completed 12 units at their institution, figures on actual transfers were only accessible through state or university records. In order to overcome these difficulties, the Center began collecting data from both individual colleges and state agencies, raising the number of participating institutions to 366 by the 1992 Transfer Assembly.

Given the high degree of success experienced in soliciting information from state agencies, from 1993, these entities became the central focus of data collection. For the two latest Transfer Assemblies, conducted in 1999 and 2001, data were obtained exclusively from state agencies.

Findings of the 2001 Transfer Assembly

For the 2001 Transfer Assembly, the Center for the Study of Community Colleges contacted the state directors of community college systems in all U.S. states. Individual states were guaranteed full confidentiality of results. The following 18 states responded by providing data on enrollment, credit completion and transfer rates for students entering their community colleges in 1995 and transferring to in-state, public four-year institutions by 1999: Alaska, Arkansas, California, Florida, Illinois, Louisiana, Maryland, Missouri, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Washington, and West Virginia. Two-year comparative data were also available for the following eight states that had also participated in the 1999 Transfer Assembly: Illinois, Louisiana, Missouri, New Jersey, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Washington, and West Virginia. In 2001, transfer rates were calculated based on 619,470 entering students from 538 colleges across the country. As such, the 2001 Transfer Assembly achieved the highest representation of community college students and colleges in the study's 12-year history.

In addition to tracking the overall transfer rates of community college students, the study has traditionally concentrated on collecting data by students' ethnicity. While the 2001 Transfer Assembly Project continues this tradition, it also began tracing transfer rates by gender and citizenship status (U.S. citizen/permanent resident vs. international student). These categories were added to the data form based on an exploratory survey sent to the state agencies participating in the 1999 project. All responses indicated the availability of data in the categories of race/ethnicity, gender, and citizenship status, while only a few could provide information on students' socioeconomic status.

The National Transfer Rate. Since its inception, the Transfer Assembly Project produced highly consistent results, ranging from 21.5 to 23.7 percent, thus demonstrating the values inherent in consistent, periodic assessment. However, in a change from earlier studies, results from the 2001 Transfer Assembly indicate an increase in national transfer rates. Of the students who entered community colleges in 1995 with no prior college experience, 52.5 percent completed a minimum of 12 credits and of that group, 25.2 percent transferred to an in-state, public university within four years. A strong relationship appears to exist between this increase and the growing population of 18-year olds in the country and the corresponding limited capacity of university freshman classes.

Table 1. Transfer Assembly National Transfer Rates: 1989-2001

Participating Colleges	Year of College Entry	Number of Entrants	Percent Receiving 12+ credits Within 4 years	Percent Transferring Within 4 years
48	1984	77,903	50.5	23.7
114	1985	191,748	46.7	23.6
155	1986	267,150	46.7	23.4
366	1987	507,757	46.9	22.6
395	1988	522,758	45.5	22.1
416	1989	511,996	44.1	21.5
417	1990	543,055	47.1	21.8
424	1991	575,959	47.3	22.1
345	1993	293,149	50.7	23.4
538	1995	619,470	52.5	25.2

As reflected in Table 1, this gradual rise began with the cohort of students entering in 1993. Given the projected rise in the demand for seats at baccalaureate-granting institutions, the increase may, in fact, be the first step in a longer-lasting trend strengthening the transfer function of community colleges. Among the states participating

in both the 1999 and the 2001 studies, transfer rates increased in five states, the highest increase being 4.7 percent, while in the remaining three states, transfer rates dropped, with the largest decrease being 3.1 percent. In one state with a large public community college system, comparison with the data obtained on the 1990 entering cohort indicated that over the past five years transfer rates in that state increased by over 8 percent.

Between- and Within-State Differences in Transfer Rates. The national transfer rate of 25.2 percent conceals considerable differences between states. Thus, transfer rates for the 18 states participating in the study ranged from 17.1 percent to 39.1 percent. Not surprisingly, the highest transfer rate was reported in a state where community colleges function as branch campuses of the state university system. In contrast, the lowest transfer rate came from a state where the public two-year college sector is historically based upon institutions with a technical focus.

Earlier rounds of the Transfer Assembly found larger differences among institutions within the individual states than those existing between states. However, because the current mode of data collection relies exclusively on state agencies, for 17 states, the Center received information as an aggregate, with no breakdowns for individual community colleges. Analyses regarding within-state differences could only be performed for one state with an overall transfer rate of 22.1 percent. In that state, the lowest reported transfer rate by an individual institution was 4.9 percent, while the highest exceeded 37 percent. Cohen & Brawer (1996b), in a national study of high and low transfer colleges identified a number of reasons explaining differences in institutional transfer rates. Besides a college's history of high or low transfer rates, common course numbering systems, specially funded projects designed to promote transfer, high

emphasis on transfer from key personnel, faculty, and students, and college-based transfer programs emerged as the most notable attributes of high-transfer colleges.

The Collegiate Function and Different Ethnic Groups

Although students from underrepresented populations, in particular black, Hispanic and American Indian students, have made considerable progress in educational achievement at every degree level (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001), they continue to lag behind white and Asian students. At the community college level, while in 1997, black students represented 11.8 percent of the student population of two-year degree-granting institutions, they earned 10.1 percent of associate degrees in 1997-98. Hispanic students constituted 12.5 percent of enrollments and earned 8.4 percent of two-year degrees. The corresponding figures for American Indians were 1.3 vs. 1.1 percent. By comparison, white students accounted for 68.2 percent of the community college student population in 1997 and earned 75.7 percent of associate degrees in 1997-98. Given these disparities in achievement, how do students at community colleges from various ethnic groups compare in terms of their transfer rates to four-year institutions?

As Table 2 demonstrates, the differences existing at the level of associate degree attainment are also present regarding student mobility from community colleges to four-year institutions. The lowest national figure, at 15.3 percent was reported for black students, followed by students from a Hispanic background at 16.9 percent. Native Americans transferred at a rate of 23 percent, relatively close to the national average and white students, with a transfer rate of 27.1 percent, exceeded the national figure of 25.2 percent.

The Transfer Assembly's results are striking for the Asian American student population. In 1997, 6.2 percent of community college students was Asian American and a slightly lower percentage of these students earned Associate degrees (4.6 percent) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). However, with a 38.1 percent transfer rate, Asian American students were overrepresented among those making the transition to senior institutions. Asian Americans, thus, appear to be the most successful student population in using the community college as a stepping stone toward the baccalaureate.

Table 2. Persistence and Transfer Rates of the 1995 Entering Cohort by Ethnicity[1]

	Ethnic Groups				
	African American	Hispanic	White	Asian American[2]	Native American
Number of Entrants	59,579	88,879	324,689	41,933	6,731
12+ Units Completed	46.1	50.4	52.3	60.5	51
Transferred	15.3	16.9	27.1	38.1	23

The Role of Gender

National figures indicate that in 1998, female students accounted for a higher proportion of public 2-year college enrollments than men (57.6 vs. 42.4 percent). Women are also overrepresented among associate degree recipients, having earned 61 percent of all degree awards in 1997-98. As a new feature of the Transfer Assembly Project, in 2001

[1] Fourteen states in the sample were able to provide data on course completion and transfer rates by different ethnic groups, the remaining two states electing to supply information as an aggregate for the overall progress of all community college entrants in their state. Due to the smaller sample, the sample size presented in this table does not correspond to the overall student population surveyed.

[2] Information for Asian students primarily comes from one state with an especially high population of Asian Americans.

the CSCC undertook to assess whether differences exist between the transfer progress of women and men at community colleges. In the sample for the 2001 Assembly, male and female community college students were distributed more evenly with women accounting for 53.1 percent and men, 46.9 percent of the population of college entrants. However, as Table 3 suggests, these differences disappear at the level of transfer. In fact, in the 1995-99 cohort, men and women transferred to senior institutions at close to equal rates.

Table 3. Persistence and Transfer Rates of 1995 Entrants by Gender and Citizenship Status[3]

	Female	Male	US Citizens/ Permanent Residents	International Students
Number of Entrants	295,146	260,246	440,775	10,893
12+ Units Completed	52.1	51.1	50.2	59.7
Transferred	25.3	25.7	25.8	31.7

International Students

In the 1999/2000 academic year, 514,723 international students were studying in the United States, representing a 4.8 percent increase from the previous year (Open Doors, n.d.). While a high proportion of these students were enrolled at the graduate level, a number of community colleges in the country have a sizeable population of foreign nationals. For example, a survey conducted by the Institute of International Education reported that Northern Virginia Community College enrolled 2,984 foreign students, 8.0 percent of its student body, and at Montgomery College in Rockville, the international population of 2,748 made up 13.2 percent of total enrollments. According to

[3] Figures for gender were calculated on the basis of data supplied by fifteen states and those for citizenship status come from ten states.

Audree Chase, international-services coordinator at the American Association of Community Colleges, the colleges' low costs, relatively open admissions and strong student services are especially influential in attracting students from other countries (Woodard, 2000). The question thus arises as to what percentage of these students continue their studies toward the baccalaureate in the United States.

Table 3 indicates that transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions plays an equally, or even more important role in the academic advancement of international students than U.S. citizens. From a sample of close to 11,000 students, 59.7 percent completed a minimum of 12 credits at the two-year institution, and 31.7 percent of those transferred to public in-state four-year institutions within four years. As such, the transfer rates of foreign students at U.S. institutions surpassed those of American citizens.

Conclusion

The 25.2 percent national transfer rate indicates that the transfer function of American community colleges is intact, providing an important avenue of educational progress for a sizeable portion of the undergraduate population. As community colleges become the only attainable institution for a rising number of 18-year olds failing to earn immediate admission to four-year colleges and universities, the collegiate function may indeed gain renewed strength. The increases in transfer rate reported from the 1999 and 2001 Transfer Assemblies may be the first signs of such a trend and future administrations of the survey using the same definition will be able to further document changes in the community college transfer function.

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